

MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

Government Shutdown Plan
1 October 2013

Congress passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 to maintain the health and stability of marine ecosystems and to prevent marine mammal stocks from diminishing beyond the point at which they cease to be significant, functioning elements of that ecosystem. Title II of the Act created the Marine Mammal Commission as an independent agency of the Executive Branch and charged the Commission with reviewing the domestic and international programs and policies of federal agencies as they pertain to marine mammals. To meet the objectives of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Commission works with federal, state, and local agencies; international, tribal and non-governmental organizations; industry; and the public.

The Marine Mammal Commission consists of three members appointed by the President subject to Senate confirmation. The Commission is assisted in its work by a nine-member Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals. The Commission also consists of an Executive Director and a small professional staff with scientific, policy, legal, budgetary, and administrative duties and expertise.

When appropriations lapse and the government shuts down, agencies are allowed to perform only limited operations, e.g., those necessary for the safety of human life and the protection of property. Otherwise, all authority to spend terminates. In such a situation, the Office of Management and Budget provides guidance regarding when and how to initiate shutdown procedures.

The Commission's mission generally does not impact the safety of human life or the protection of property. However, exigent matters involving marine mammals, such as unusual mortality events, may arise that can pose a risk to human health and safety or to property¹. In such cases, action by the Commission may be warranted despite the government shutdown.

The Commissioners, who are Presidential appointees subject to Senate confirmation, serve as special government employees and are compensated on an hourly basis. Thus, they are not automatically exempt from the furlough requirements. Because the Commission does not routinely address matters that involve threats to human health or safety or that pose a risk to property, the Commissioners would not remain on duty during a shutdown. However, should a situation arise that involves marine mammals and threatens human health and safety or property, the Commissioners would be called-back to oversee those issues. In such a case, the Commissioners would confine their work to exigent matters involving risks to public health or safety or to property. The Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals is subject to the Federal Advisory Committee Act and, subject to guidance provided by the Committee Management Secretariat of the General Services Administration, all Committee activities would cease in the event of a shutdown.

¹ Such issue might include, for example, a large stranding of marine mammals that pose a health risk to people in a particular coastal area. Those cases are expected to be highly unusual.

The Executive Director has been identified as a conditionally excepted employee for the limited purposes of monitoring telephone, email, and other communications with the Commission, in order to identify and advise the Commissioners of possible emergency situations that would warrant a call-back of the Commissioners or staff or for purposes of communicating with the Office of Management and Budget about the status of agency activities during a shutdown. The Executive Director also will come to the Commission's office as needed to ensure that the Commission's mail is secured. She will not read or review the mail while the government is shut down, except as it may pertain to emergency situations. The General Counsel and Administrative Officer also have been identified as conditionally exempt employees and may monitor communications from the Executive Director or other agencies to provide advice and support related to implementing the shutdown or initiating a recall of employees. As a general matter, during a government-wide shutdown, all other staff will be placed in a furlough status. Nevertheless, the Commission retains the flexibility to recall staff members if necessary to respond to matters that place human health, safety, or property in jeopardy.

Except as provided above, during a shutdown the Commissioners, members of the Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals, and staff are not allowed to enter the office, telecommute, obligate funds, work on Commission business, or use Commission equipment (computers, telephones, blackberries, etc). In short, all work must stop until further notice.

The Office of Management and Budget will announce when the government is open and will provide directions on administrative matters pertaining to salary, time keeping, benefits, etc.

The Executive Director will inform members of the Commission, Committee, and staff when the budget issue is resolved and when to report back to the office.